

Forum: Equal-wage mandate falls short in state

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WORCESTER - Massachusetts has required equal pay for equal work since 1945, but a group of state policy, community, and business leaders agreed during a roundtable discussion Thursday that the laws are not enough and the commonwealth is, as a result, suffering.

“We don’t need more laws, we don’t need more legislation: We need people to do it,” state Treasurer Deborah Goldberg said Wednesday at a panel discussion at the University of Massachusetts Medical School Commonwealth Medicine Division. “It’s an economic issue in Massachusetts, it’s an economic issue in the country. It impacts families, it impacts consumer spending, it impacts social services, it impacts people’s comfortable retirement.”

Ms. Goldberg visited UMass Medical School Thursday afternoon to host the third regional roundtable held by a new statewide Advisory Committee on Wage Equality. This committee seeks, among other goals, to develop a wage equality “tool kit” for businesses and a state-run equal pay website for resources on wage equality. The committee is also planning a statewide conference next April to convene policymakers, businesses and organizations to share best strategies on closing the wage gap between men and women.

Panelists and Ms. Goldberg contrasted Massachusetts’ pioneering history concerning wage equality - the state was the first in the country to require equal pay for equal work - with sobering statistics: Women in Massachusetts earn on average 82 cents for every dollar earned by men. Minority women fare worse, with black women earning 61 cents on the dollar and Latino women earning 50 cents.

“So far the laws haven’t changed anything,” said the Rev. Liz Walker, pastor of Roxbury Presbyterian Church and a former news anchor on WBZ-TV. Ms. Walker discussed a single mother in her church who worked as a public school social worker, an Uber driver and sold jewelry to support her two children.

“She is trying with everything she has to make it, and it doesn’t seem fair to me that a woman who is bright and intelligent and has everything that she should have, should have to work that hard to survive,” Ms. Walker said. “Poverty is not about making wrong choices, poverty is when you run out of choices.”

But Ms. Goldberg said the wage gap doesn’t just impact women working in what Ms. Walker described as “the gig economy” in which her parishioner worked.

Women face wage gaps in some of the state's biggest, rapidly growing and lucrative industries: fields involving science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) and financial services.

Several panelists attributed these problems to cultural and institutional factors rather than outright misogyny. Ms. Goldberg noted a culture where robotics club is "not cool" for middle school girls and which discourages women from developing negotiating skills. A lack of female leaders and mentors in these lucrative and growing fields exacerbate the problem, as there are no clear pathways for many women, panelists said.

Sometimes there is also "inadvertent steering," where women will be steered to various jobs seen as a "better fit" for women's skills but which are lower paying. Panelist Kristin Lewis, vice president of government affairs and public policy at Tufts Health Plan, cited a court case in which a Boston parking garage posted two job opportunities: valets and cashiers. The garage was found to have steered female applicants to cashier positions while steering valet jobs to men.

"There's bias there — we don't have to discuss that today," Ms. Lewis said.

Ms. Goldberg interjected. "Because women are better drivers ... and better counters," she deadpanned to laughter.

But even among organizations whose leaders are aware of wage equality, the problem can exist.

Panelist Maeghan Welford, chief of staff of the Massachusetts Technology Collaborative, noted that her organization's analysis of its parental leave policy revealed that a woman would lose 10 percent of her income and salary benefits for a year in which she took a 5- to 8-week leave.

Panelist Joyce A. Murphy, executive vice chancellor of Commonwealth Medicine, noted a recent study showing a wide gender wage gap in the awarding of federal National Institute of Health research funds and start-up support among Massachusetts hospitals, including University of Massachusetts Medical School.

To correct the wage disparity, panelists offered several suggestions.

Steven Tolman, president of the Massachusetts AFL-CIO, advocated support of unions, saying that women in unions made 89 cents to the dollar compared with 82 cents on the dollar when not represented.

Ms. Lewis urged that, among other things, employers document all employment offers made and the resulting decisions, not attach an application to a job other than the one to which the applicant applied, and have a "competitive and transparent" promotion system.

And panelists said that companies without a wage gap benefited from employees with more diversity both in skills and experience, happier employees and employees who did not rely on social services but had income to contribute to the larger economy.

"It's not just the law and the right thing to do, it's good for business," Ms. Murphy said. "We need to keep pushing the envelope and working on this ... it's astounding that here we are in 2015 having this conversation."